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Eventual Chinese actions in Taiwan: Consequences for India's sovereignty

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Abstract

The relationship between Indo-China and China-Taiwan has been complex throughout the history of these modern states. The crises in Ukraine and Gaza have destabilised the fragile international order and have the potential to incite aggressive actions from other nations too. China's ambitions regarding Taiwan have a similar likelihood of sparking a larger confrontation in the larger Indo-Pacific and especially India. The paper examines the historical reasons for Chinese fascination with Taiwan and what is the importance of Taiwan's survival for India today. It also explores how the Chinese annexation there could escalate land disputes at the LAC. The paper analyses how a conflict involving the West could create a dilemma for New Delhi. A serious conflict at the India-China border could potentially lead to a full-scale war, given India's active approach to protecting its sovereignty and China's growing might. Thus, analysing what could be the potential danger to Indian sovereignty becomes paramount.

Keywords: Taiwan, China, South China Sea, LAC, conflict

1. Introduction

One of the major nations currently in the spotlight due to its aggressive stance in its region is China. China has numerous border and strategic disputes with neighbouring nations. One such dispute is centred on the South China Sea, where China claims authority over extensive marine territories, leading to conflicts with other nations such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. The India, China border, particularly the Line of Actual Control (LAC), is also a troubled area, with both nations having unresolved territorial disputes that have led to sporadic military encounters.

The relationship between China and Taiwan is tense due to China's historical claims to the territory. This tension involves complex geopolitical and historical issues, leading to local unrest and global concerns. Taiwan's status is crucial for Beijing's long-term strategic goals as it presents a direct challenge to China and has strong relationships with the United States and India, who are also challengers to China's power. Additionally, Taiwan poses an obstacle to Beijing's strategic objectives in the South China Sea. There is speculation that the South China Sea could be the stage for the next global conflict (Farley, 2021) ^[4]. In the South China Sea, the most active and belligerent claimant has been China, which has created artificial islands and militarized them with missiles, lasers and planes (Davenport, 2018, p. 76) ^[2]. The United States and its allies from the West, as well as India from the South, have contested China's claims and activities in the region. They have conducted freedom of navigation operations and supported rival claimants supporting freedom of movement. This has created a sensitive and unstable scenario, where there is a risk that a miscalculation or accident could escalate into a major conflict.

The paper explores the historical reasons behind China's interest in Taiwan and the significance of Taiwan's survival to India. It also discusses how the Chinese annexation of Taiwan could escalate land disputes at the LAC. Additionally, the paper analyses how a conflict in the Indo-Pacific region involving the West could pose a dilemma for New Delhi. It also highlights that a serious conflict at the India-China border could potentially lead to a full-scale war, given India's proactive approach to safeguarding its sovereignty and China's increasing assertiveness. As Pant (2023b) ^[9] has suggested, the China-Taiwan situation requires a thorough examination of India's military, diplomatic and economic reactions, given the high stakes involved. This aspect has been lacking in Indian policy discourse.

With the resolution of China's Taiwan issue, Beijing's next target could be its 'five-finger policy,' potentially leading to a larger confrontation between the two Asian giants. Thus, studying and understanding what could be the potential danger to Indian sovereignty becomes paramount.

2. Event sparking the global concerns

The Russia-Ukraine War of 2022 has brought about two significant developments in the current geopolitical landscape. Firstly, it dispelled the misconception that a large nuclear power could swiftly conquer a smaller state through military force alone. Secondly, the war has catalysed the fragile global order, emboldening nations to pursue their geopolitical ambitions through military action. The ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict since 2023 is a further example of this trend, with potentially far-reaching implications for peace and stability in the wider Middle East. The war in Europe has had catastrophic consequences not only for the immediate region but also for the entire interconnected global community, leading to a market crash and instability throughout the globe.

The Russian military's actions in Ukraine raised significant concerns worldwide, both geopolitically and economically. During the military operations in Ukraine, geopolitical risk analysts and scholars were worried about the potential domino effect this event could have on the world, in addition to the existing geopolitical tension in Europe. The inefficiency of Western nations, particularly the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in deterring Moscow from military actions in Ukraine drew the attention of analysts. Moscow's actions and the diminishing soft power of the West, particularly after the Gaza humanitarian crisis, could pave the way for other nations with conflicting strategic interests to pursue their ambitions. It is no hidden fact of China's opportunistic nature and how desperate it would be today to annex the strategically important Taiwan. Especially when the only major adversary of Beijing, the US, is already busy and stretched in the ongoing two major conflicts.

3. China's fascination with Taiwan

The origins of the Taiwan conflict trace back to the early 20th century. The nationalist Kuomintang (KMT), led by Chiang Kai-shek, and the Communist Party of China (CPC) engaged in a violent power struggle after the fall of the Qing dynasty and the revolution that established the Republic of China in 1911. Following a massacre in Shanghai in 1927, the Communist Party revolted against the KMT government, precipitating a brutal civil war. Following World War II, the internal conflict resumed vigorously after being halted due to the Japanese invasion and the global war.

Mao Zedong's Communists emerged victorious in 1949, leading the KMT leaders to relocate their capital from Nanjing to Taipei as they fled to the island of Taiwan. There, they established the Republic of China (ROC) Government. Meanwhile, the People's Republic of China (PRC) Government was established after the Communist Party took control of the mainland. Taiwan was under Japanese colonial rule from 1895 to 1945. Taiwan is considered a renegade province by the CPC, and they aim to unite it with Mainland China. However, Taiwan claims it was never a part of the PRC. In the 1980s, China-Taiwan relations improved with an agreement signed in 1992, but nearly fought in 1995-96. Economic ties increased in the late 1990s due to the Kuomintang government's Beijing-

friendly stance. China passed what was referred to as an 'anti-secession law' toward Taiwan in 2005 to prevent US military intervention in Taiwan's independence (Gupta, 2005, p. 289) ^[5].

Since 2016, the relationship between China and Taiwan has become strained due to Xi Jinping's more assertive nationalism in China and Tsai Ing-wen's (The 7th Taiwanese President) hard stance on Taiwan's independence. Both China and Taiwan do not consider their relationship to be foreign, and they prefer to use the term 'cross-strait relations' when referring to the Taiwan Strait. There is no direct communication between the governments of China and Taiwan. As of January 2024, Taiwan maintains formal diplomatic relations with 12 of the 193 United Nations member nations (T. Wu & Moritsugu, 2024) ^[13]. No major countries formally recognise Taiwan due to China's power and influence. Beijing's aim to resolve the Taiwan problem and attain complete reunification of China is historic. China implements resolute measures to prevent any attempts at Taiwanese independence.

4. India's engagement with Taiwan

Following achieving independence in 1947, India briefly sustained diplomatic relations with the ROC. India and ROC maintained ambassadors in their respective capitals, Delhi and Nanking, until 1948/1949. After the establishment of the PRC in October 1949, India acknowledged the new administration while simultaneously discontinuing relations with the ROC (Singh, 2018, p. 222) ^[10]. When the KMT administration of China retreated to Taiwan and founded the ROC there, India refrained from establishing any official ties with Taiwan until the early 1990s.

In early 1990, both parties commenced steps to restore their relations. The Taiwan External Trade Development Council (TAITRA) inaugurated a liaison office in Mumbai in 1992, while India created the India-Taipei Association (ITA) as its representative office in Taipei for economic engagement in 1995 (Hashmi, 2020, p. 36) ^[6]. In the 1990s, India initiated a Look East Policy, which was subsequently rebranded as the Act East Policy in 2014 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, accompanied by investments in regional nations. Taiwan is encompassed under the broader framework of Indian foreign policy in this region.

Taiwan is actively working to emphasise its collaboration with India as part of its New Southbound Policy (NSP). India has recently gained significance for Taiwan under the NSP. James Huang, Chairman of TAITRA, stated, "India is significant to us in terms of commerce and investment. In the past, we neglected to pay adequate attention to India" (Singh, 2018, p. 223) ^[10]. Tsai Ing-wen unveiled the New Southbound Policy on August 16, 2016. The NSP has subsequently transformed into a premier government initiative. The NSP is the third phase of the 'Go South Policy,' initially launched in 1994 by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), with the subsequent phase commencing in January 2002. The primary aim of the program is to foster a 'sense of economic community.' The policy has enabled Taiwan to expand its international presence. Taiwan's aggressive engagement with the global community and the world's receptive response to this initiative have provoked China. Under Jinping, China has adopted a more aggressive and coercive stance towards the island nation.

Following the 2020 clashes in the Galwan Valley, there has been an increased demand for India to aggressively connect with Taiwan, and the national discourse is increasingly

favouring Taiwan. India's leadership has long overlooked the establishment of stable relations with Taiwan due to apprehensions regarding the potential jeopardization of its relationship with China. This concern about annoying China has slowed India-Taiwan relations over the past. The India-Taiwan relationship has been at a stalemate for a long time and has not even been highlighted by analysts. Hashmi (2020) ^[6] accurately observes that India-Taiwan ties constitute one of the most neglected and undervalued connections of the twenty-first century (p. 33). Chinese encroachment policy on Indian Territory has provided New Delhi with justifiable grounds to alter its longstanding policy of avoiding displeasing China.

5. Impact of China's Taiwan aggression on India

The potential consequences of Chinese aggression towards Taiwan could have a significant impact on India. The wider Indo-Pacific region would experience increased tension, negatively affecting India's strategic interests. India has been strengthening its ties with Taiwan, particularly in commerce and technology. India-Taiwan trade has gone up from US\$ 1.19 billion in 2001-02 to US\$ 8.224 billion in 2022-23 (Hashmi, 2020, p. 37; Taipei Economic and Cultural Center in India, 2024) ^[6, 11]. China's assertiveness may lead India to reconsider its relationship and possibly increase its support for Taiwan to protect Indian interests. This could further strain Sino-Indian relations. A confrontational China might shift New Delhi's focus to its northern border, where long-standing border disputes exist. The global response to China's hostility towards Taiwan could establish a precedent for how other nations handle border disputes, potentially affecting India's border conflicts with China and Pakistan. India is likely to closely monitor and assess the situation in Taiwan, considering the broader implications for its regional and international interests.

In the event of conflict, India will experience a disruption in its trade via the South China Sea, which constitutes approximately 55% of its total trade with the Indo-Pacific region (Pant, 2023a) ^[8]. Furthermore, trade between India and Taiwan, which has escalated in recent years, along with China (India's second-largest economic partner), East Asia and other Southeast Asian countries, is expected to have significant detrimental effects. Trade with India accounts for around 80% of Taiwan's total trade with South Asian countries. Approximately 250 Taiwanese companies have invested more than US\$4 billion in India (Everington, 2023) ^[3]. Semiconductors cannot be ignored in today's digital world. Taiwan and India have been strengthening their cooperation in the semiconductor industry. In March 2024, it was announced that a collaboration would be established to build a semiconductor manufacturing facility in Gujarat as part of India's 'Chips for Viksit Bharat' initiative. This partnership is valued at approximately \$15 billion and is one of three critical semiconductor initiatives within the plan.

5.1 The Dilemma for India

Any major conflict in the Indo-Pacific region, especially China's conflict with India or even Taiwan, will disturb the whole balance of the region. Somehow, Taiwan is linked to India's strategic interests. Lendon (2021) ^[7] has correctly noted that despite Taiwan and the Himalayas being 500 kilometres apart, the intensity of their territorial disputes with Beijing appears to be escalating. The US also has its strategic interests vested in the Indo-Pacific and has recently changed its focus from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific, and Taiwan's autonomy is key to Washington.

The US engagement with Taiwan is what has stopped Beijing from taking any significant steps in Taiwan, and if China infiltrates Taiwan, Washington will not sit idly by, as we have witnessed in Ukraine and Israel. As Brands (2021) ^[1] claimed, India, the largest democracy in the world, is unavoidably, if not always enthusiastically, prominent in a US-China rivalry that President Joe Biden frames as free countries versus autocracies. Washington will expect India to intervene, and then New Delhi may not have the privilege to act neutrally like in the Ukraine and Gaza crises.

5.2 After Taiwan threat

Hypothetically, if China were to successfully infiltrate Taiwan, which could be a distinct possibility in the event of prolonged Israeli-led conflict in the Middle East and Russia's advancement in Ukraine. In such a scenario, any conflict in the Indo-Pacific would strain Washington's military capabilities and China, with its current economic and military strength, could significantly alter the dynamics of the region. If China were to succeed in Taiwan, despite facing significant internal challenges, it would have strategic implications for India along the LAC in the future. Authoritarian regimes often exploit external conflicts to distract from internal uprisings and opposition. Beijing can use conflict at LAC as propaganda to suppress rising internal voices.

Following Taiwan, China can concentrate on its 'Five Finger Policy,' a concept of Chinese foreign policy attributed to Mao Zedong. Tibet is considered the central part of China, with Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh representing peripheral regions that China aims to 'liberate'. After the stalemate in Doklam in 2017, a CCP magazine acknowledged this stance, albeit it was never formally proclaimed by the Chinese government. India has long been aware of the Chinese intentions, and that is not very peaceful. Since 2010, India has ceased to reference its commitment to the One-China policy in joint declarations with China and other official papers (Hashmi, 2020, p. 40) ^[6]. New Delhi has changed its foreign policies in recent years, it has become active. No challenge to Indian sovereignty goes unanswered today.

The survival of a free Taiwan is essential for New Delhi. China's strategic position presents challenges for both land-based and maritime security. Yoshihara and Bianchi (2021) ^[14] claim that if China were to capture Taiwan, it could gain dominance in maritime Asia, potentially leading to a shift in Beijing's approach and a resolution of its differences with India on land (p. ii). A Chinese-occupied Taiwan could escalate tensions in the Himalayas, and with India's growing power, any major conflict in the LAC could lead to a full-fledged war between the two Asian powers.

6. Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine war and the Gaza crisis, apart from being disastrous, have put doubts in the minds of geopolitical analysts about China's future steps regarding the Taiwan issue. The Western countries have failed to act as a deterrent in the case of Russia-Ukraine and have received condemnation over the humanitarian crises in Gaza. Thus, there is a risk of the same happening on the Asian grounds too. The blunderous pullout of the US from Afghanistan in 2021 has given doubts to nations like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, who were assured of the US as a shield for their protection from any foreign aggression. China has long been preparing for the invasion of Taiwan and regularly bullies Taiwan by illegally entering Taiwanese

airspace. The question today is not whether China will attack Taiwan or not, but when Beijing will do so, unless something comes up as a big deterrent.

India has a vested interest in maintaining stability in the Asian region. A destabilized region would have negative geopolitical and economic implications for New Delhi. If China were to resolve its issues with Taiwan and the South China Sea, the authoritarian one-party government would likely focus on the Himalayan region to exert control over its citizens through national security propaganda. Given India's growing military strength, any miscalculated confrontation at the LAC could escalate into a large-scale war between the two nuclear powers, which would have disastrous consequences for the entire world. In the aftermath of the Sino-Indian conflict, Islamabad would definitely try to capitalize on the situation. There is a possibility that New Delhi would be involved in a conflict on two fronts, which is not ideal for a country that is expanding. It would be difficult to realise the goal of a Vikshit Bharat by the year 2047 if the country were to experience any major conflict, which would put the nation back years in terms of development.

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